

# How the Peon Girl Rules the State with Iron Hand

## Takes Possession of Governor's Palace and First Order Is That Divorces Are Free and No Questions Asked—Courts Forced to Obey Her Dictates



Gov. Felipe Carillo Puerto.

ACCORDING to the best opinions expressed in society and in the law books of most nations it is not sufficient for the husband who wishes to divorce his wife to plead merely that she has red hair and he would rather it were black; or that her nose is retroussé and he would prefer it strictly Grecian; or that her temper is shorter than the measurements to which he would like it extended. There may be here and there a modern husband who would subscribe to the theory that such excuses should be admitted in divorce courts as satisfactorily condemning evidence, but they may be considered as being among the cautious minority.

On the other hand, there are few places where a wife may be legally separated from her husband early Tuesday morning because late Monday night she decided in a huff she didn't like him. One of these few places—and, in fact, the only place definitely known of—is Yucatan. According to the majority of geographers, Yucatan is a State of Mexico. Those who have a more comprehensive knowledge than geographers will add that Yucatan also is just now a state of mind. A state of mental exuberance wherein no man need live with a wife, or support her, or, in fact, pay any attention to her at all if he doesn't want to—and if he knows the Judge.

Because Yucatan has, according to news advices, gone "loco," as is said in Texas. All of which is attributable to a woman, a rather young and comely woman, who not so very long ago was noted as far as Yucatan is wide for the circumstance of her being the most gentle feminine peon on the estate of a rich land owner in the neighborhood of Merida, the capital of the State of Yucatan. And thereby hangs a romance which remains a romance despite the rather unpleasant situation which has arisen to embellish it.

Yucatan has turned completely, thoroughly "Communist." The term is more definite than mere "Bolshevistic." Ignoring wholly the Central Government at Mexico city, the State has given itself over to a committee of ten or twenty-six ex-peons headed normally by the civil Governor appointed from the capital, but actually headed and inspired and completely dominated by the young woman mentioned above, who is Blanca Carbenno, 22 years old, of antecedents so unaccountable that nothing whatever is known of them beyond the fact that she was until she took into her own hands the reins of Yucatan's Government little more than a slave girl on the estate of the rich landowner.

The new Governor of Yucatan, appointed by President Obregon a few months ago, is Felipe Carillo Puerto. He was the protégé of Plutarco Elias Calles the Secretary of State and Minister of the Interior. He is not an especially prepossessing person in appearance, nor had his political career been marked by any startling events bringing about him enduring fame. Yet these limitations did not prevent Blanca Carbenno from glancing at him with favor showing in her dark, luminous eyes, as he rode through the fields of her master's plantation on his way to pay a formal call at the hacienda.

And the new Governor, noticing perhaps the light of favor shining in those dark eyes of the comely peon girl, at work in the fields with the men peons, was not

too dignified to stop his horse and his staff of accompanying officers, while he doffed his hat to her and motioned her to come nearer for a word or two.

With the doffing of that gubernatorial hat all things having to do with law and order in Yucatan went awry and all husbands and wives not totally satisfied with each other were liberated from their conjugal bonds. For that is, virtually, the situation that was then and there born.

Which is the romantic background of the amazing news from Yucatan.

Nothing is known, reliably, of the incidents of the Governor's visit to the rich



The Palace of Justice, Merida, Yucatan. It is here the judges hand out divorces to all who apply and no questions asked.

plantation owner, nor of what and where was the next meeting between the peon girl and the high official. It is only known that she appeared shortly after in the streets of Merida, a beautiful and then prosperous Mexican city, larger certainly than any city Blanca Carbenno ever dreamed of as really existing, and with shop windows which perhaps not competently rivaling those of Paris, were nevertheless marvelous visions to the unurban peon girl.

Seen also in the streets of Merida, shortly after, were others of the peon class—men and women who came from Blanca's former neighborhood, and who met in strange little buildings and talked over certain plans with Blanca, who was their acknowledged leader. From these meetings Blanca would go to the palace of the Governor. And from the palace of the Governor she would return to the meetings. It was understood that the Governor had asked Blanca to marry him, or something of the sort, and that she had gained thereby a certain influence over him which was being guided by the peons who were in her confidence and who had decided, in conspiracy with her, perhaps, to take full advantage of their opportunity to reach the ears of the Governor.

Without warning, one night, there was a quiet uprising in Merida. Several hundreds of excited men and women—several hundreds are many in any outlying Mexican capital—paraded the streets with weird torchlights, proclaiming whatever the local dialect term for a Soviet government may be. The crowd converged upon the palace, from the front steps of which it announced, through the shrill voice of Blanca herself, that there was now no more of such a thing as government except as the "people" expressed it—or however it was put. The pronouncement was to the effect, it soon seemed, that Communism was announced.

It was discovered, when the business interests of the city, and the representatives of the plantation owners protested, that the Governor himself was in the power of Blanca, who had become overnight a willful, autocratic dictator, absolute master of the "committee" formed to revise governmental affairs, and that it was her word, and not that of the Governor, which had become the law.

It is difficult to picture the upheaval or its circumstances. The machinery of legal government was not elaborate, but there were courts, jails, tax collectors and bureaus which kept the records of property ownership and upheld lawful deeds and proprietary rights. The bureaus promptly were taken in charge by Blanca, whose "committee" appointed new officials for them, or supervisors with power to direct the acts of the established officials.

Judges of the law courts were summoned to the palace, where they were received by the Governor, who issued to them orders which were, in effect, new laws. All statutes hitherto made and provided, as would be said in the States, were ruthlessly abrogated. The judges were instructed to make decrees and decisions on all matters in compliance with the wishes of the "committee." And when the judges waited upon this committee, which it found sitting in another room of the Governor's palace, they found it a silent body except for its chosen voice—the voice of Blanca, the former peon girl.

The first two orders issued to the judges by Blanca were: "Take the land away from the present owners and distribute it among the peons—equal share to all. If the landowners object, shoot them."

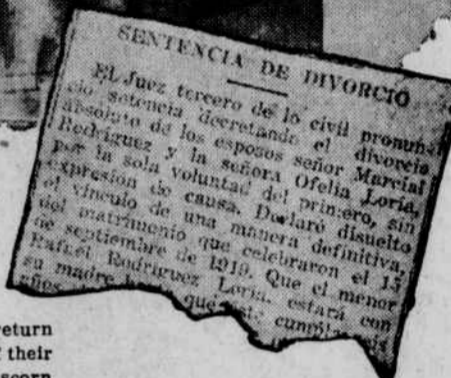
Ofelia Loria, at the sole request of the husband, who gave no grounds as the basis of his complaint. The decree severed the bonds of matrimony, absolutely, of the marriage contracted between the parties on the 15th day of September, 1919. The child, Rafael Rodriguez Loria, shall remain in the custody of his mother until he has completed his sixth year and so long as she shall live discreetly and shall contract no other marriage. Both parties resume their legal capacity and may freely remarry, except that the woman may not formally remarry until three hundred days after the provisional separation. Both parties must contribute proportionately to the maintenance and education of their son until he shall have attained his majority.

Marcel Rodriguez was not a resident of the State of Yucatan. He lived in an adjoining State, where the civil courts had refused to grant him a divorce despite frequent pleas, it being apparent to his home judges that he wished a divorce only that he might marry the principal dancing girl attached to the Banda Policia of his own capital city. The judges dominated by Blanca had no scruples whatever as to the dancing girl. They were powerless otherwise than to grant the divorce for the simple asking. Many residents of other States, some coming even from Mexico city itself, appear before the Yucatan judges with similar lack of reasons for wishing separation from their husbands or their wives. There is a case of record in which the complaining wife did put forth a reason for her desire to have freedom. She said in her formal document that she wanted to marry her next door neighbor, who owned a phonograph.

It is not at all improbable that many a husband may remark to his wife just after breakfast, "My dear, would you mind



Blanca Carbenno, the ex-peon girl, new ruler of Yucatan, and a clipping from the Mexican newspaper, translated elsewhere on this page.



of the welfare of the State and to return at least some substantial portions of their land. She met this appeal with scorn and ridicule. She had been the virtual slave of one of these landowners. She flung this fact in their faces and told them she was mistress of a new order of things and they had best make their departure beyond the borders of the State while she still was in a mood to let them get away at all.

The only industry in Yucatan, the foundation of all of its prosperity, has been the growing, preparation and marketing of sisal hemp—henequen. Peonage existed, as it does in all the minor Mexican States. It seemed to be a natural, national institution. The peons themselves, in the quieter districts, seemed to object but little. The hacienda owners were usually painstaking in their relations toward the peons—good and reasonably generous to them, it is generally said. The plantation owners in Yucatan, some of them controlling thousands of acres, produced enormous hemp crops, which found their way through the port of Progreso and made Yucatan one of the most prosperous of the Mexican States.

The industry is dead now. The former peons own the land and rejoice greatly thereat, but there are no seeds and no means of repairing the implements which have broken down under handling without skilled direction. Blanca has many formulas for the remedy of this situation. While she waits for these to be brewed into materialization she intrigues her people with her new matrimonial provisions and such mandates as her latest—"that all storekeepers must give credit to whatever customer may ask it." The consequence of this last order is

her, but to these it might be said she could do the same. Therefore it remains somewhat mysterious—that she should, having so completely taken to herself the Governor's power, refuse to listen to his plea of marriage.

For her own residence she has taken over the town house of one of the formerly rich residents, and here she has made room for the other women members of her committee. The Governor remains at the palace, and observes all the rules of state etiquette and its pomp. But the peon girl is the actual head of the State.

The personnel of Blanca's Soviet committee is extremely interesting. Each member of the committee has been appointed by her. They include Indian women from plantations far in the interior of Yucatan and miles from any railroad. One of these women worked on the same plantation with Blanca herself. She is one of the lower Indian types, without intelligence, and virtually no knowledge whatever of any sort of life other than the restricted social life at the hacienda. It is said that she was nursed by the same foster mother who nursed Blanca. This, of course, is only gossip, although it might very well be true. She is typical of one section of the committee.

Then there are adventurers from other Mexican States, some from Panama, and some even fugitives from South America. Whoever appears in Merida without being able to tell much in detail of where he came from is welcomed by the new Dictator, provided the stranger is revolutionary.

On the committee, for example, there is an itinerant photographer, who, it is said, found Havana extremely uncomfortable for him. He has been given complete jurisdiction over the public and parochial school system in the State. Because he could take a photograph and develop it

in his "mysterious" chemicals Blanca thought he surely must be a great, intellectual, scientific savant—and, therefore, completely qualified to supervise the education of even the sons and daughters of the rich. It probably is not necessary to even attempt to describe the effect upon the schools of this vagrant photographer's ideas of education.

The Secretary of Police in Blanca's Cabinet was an adventurer who came up from Central America wearing a ragged uniform, which indicated that he had suddenly left the military establishment of Panama. He was not asked why he had left nor why his departure was sudden. Having a uniform, he seemed to Blanca

to be the proper person to control the somewhat undisciplined police force of her State. One of his first general orders was for his policemen to arrest and imprison any one who objected to his appointment. Since this order was countersigned by Blanca and further approved by the Governor and also supported by the entire police organization, it may be stated authoritatively that approval of this man's appointment of Police Chief continues to be unanimous.

There is one American on the committee, who makes appointments for Blanca and serves the Governor as an assistant,



Blanca Carbenno, the former peon girl, in the center, and her committee through which she governs Yucatan. Governor Puerto is at her right and just behind her.

"And make divorce free."

By "free" it was soon made evident Blanca meant give every wife a divorce who wants one; and give every man a divorce who wants one. Don't interfere with their own family affairs by asking them what they want it for. If they ask it, give it.

And so "free" divorce became, in a moment, the law of the land—as did the division of real property.

Whatever appeal was made to Governor Puerto was futile. He countersigned every decree made by Blanca in the name of her "committee." As the result: The following is the translation of one of hundreds of similar news items in the columns of the *Revista de Yucatan*, the principal one of the three daily newspapers published in Merida:

### JUDGMENT OF DIVORCE.

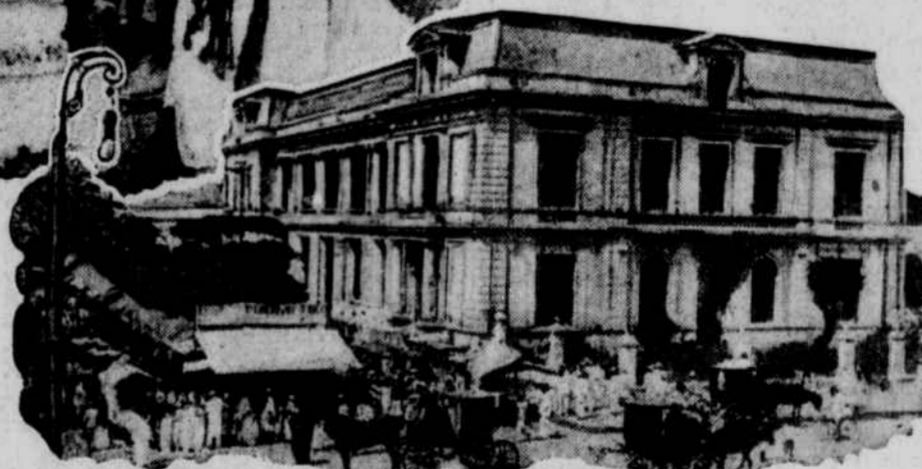
The third civil judge has entered judgment of absolute divorce between the couple Marcel Rodriguez and his wife

meeting me at the Palace of Justice at 10 o'clock? I'm going to stop in there on my way home for the noon siesta to get a divorce."

Recently a convention of the former owners of the land in Yucatan, some of them descendants of families which had owned the great plantations since long before the time of Diaz, was held in Progreso, the Yucatan seaport. A committee was appointed to wait upon Blanca, it being realized that appeals to the Governor were useless. These representatives of the established aristocracy of Mexico pleaded with the young woman to think

that the storekeepers have closed their shops and have disappeared with whatever they could smuggle across the border.

Blanca and her committee hold court daily in the Governor's palace. Whatever decrees the committee issues are first signed by Blanca and then put into effect. Later they are signed by the Governor and fled away with the State archives. The remarkable thing is that the Governor has not yet persuaded Blanca to marry him. Cynical visitors to Merida declare this is easily understood, since, by her own decree, he could divorce her immediately if he became wearied of



The Governor's Palace at Merida, where Blanca meets with her committee and issues her orders.